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ABSTRACT

At the Schuykill Campus of Pennsylvania State University, an academic intervention and support system has been developed which identifies and monitors high-risk students until they are able to succeed on their own or decide to leave school. The campus's LOFT Learning Center has created a link with the Admission's Office that is central to the success of the intervention and support system. Communication between the Admissions Office and the Learning Center is facilitated by having a LOFT staff member work in the Admissions Office for 30 hours per week during the summer and 15 hours per week during the school year. This allows the Center to receive early information on high-risk students admitted to the college; aids in monitoring the performance of assigned students; helps to maintain communication with the Admissions Office; provides the staff member with a more in-depth understanding of student difficulties in keeping up with course work loads; and provides a great deal of detailed information on the students and their performance. The Admissions Office and Learning Center work together in a variety of ways throughout the admissions sequence; e.g., in developing academic profiles for each student; in providing counseling for students prior to the beginning of classes; in having Learning Center staff make presentations at freshman orientation; and in monitoring student performance throughout the year. (HB)

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The Role of the Admissions Office in the Academic Intervention and Support Program

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Presented at the 8th Annual National Conference of the National Association for Remedial/Developmental Studies in Postsecondary Education
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The Role of the Admissions Office

in the

Academic Intervention and Support Program

For an academic intervention and support system to work effectively, the students must be identified as early as possible and monitored closely from the day they begin classes until they are able to succeed on their own or until that time that they decide to leave school. For many students the demands of college work are overwhelming because they either don't have the intelligence to do high level work or because they lack the self-discipline,motivation, study skills, or educational background to do it. Whatever the reason students are classified as "disadvantaged" or "at risk," the sooner their problems can be addressed, the better their chances are of being taught to be successful learners.

The LOFT Learning Center at Penn State's Schuylkill Campus created a link with the Admissions Office so that LOFT staff would know immediately who was being admitted to the University at that campus and which people were considered to be at risk because of poor placement test scores, low College Board scores, or poor high school grades. Because the learning center has relied, since its inception in 1981, primarily on outside funding to pay for its program, the staff has needed to identify a specific grant population each year before school starts so all the eligible students could be contacted personally before the end of their first week in school and enrolled in the program. The LOFT program is entirely voluntary and so it depends even more on getting people to

participate while they are at the height of their enthusiasm about college. It doesn't take very long for some students to become frustrated and disillusioned about the difficulty of the work and the amount of time they must invest in their studies if they want to pass. Thus timing is a key determiner of success in an intervention and support program.

Open communication between the Admissions Office and the LOFT Learning Center is made possible by having a LOFT staff person work in Admissions thirty hours a week during the summer months and about fifteen hours a week during the school year. This person becomes involved in the summer counseling program, talks to students and their parents, sees all the records and test results, knows University requirements for various programs, learns rules, regulations, and policies, and gains a wealth of other information which is very valuable to LOFT staff whose job it is to give students sound advice and keep them in school. During the 1984-85 school year the LOFT's "Program for Success" worked with 140 students, all of whom had been identified and contacted before they started classes Fall Semester. The person who is the liaison between Admissions and the learning center keeps the LOFT staff informed about the students' current status and the University rules, deadlines, etc. Consequently, as they monitor their assigned students, they have a better understanding of how to advise the students.

A second advantage of having a link with the Admissions Office is that at mid-semester, when all the faculty submit their D and F notices of students who are in academic difficulty to that office, the LOFT person who works there can get a list of program participants who are in trouble and share it with the rest of the staff. Thus even students who

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Since the Admissions Office is the place students go to make important decisions about selecting courses, dropping or adding courses, withdrawing from school, transferring to another school, etc. and since it is the place where important student records are kept, it is very important to maintain open lines of communication with this office at all times. Admissions Office personnel have to be thoroughly familiar with the University catalog and all the rules, regulations, requirements, deadlines, etc. that often determine a student's success or failure. Having a staff member who is knowledgeable about this information is a tremendous asset to the

program since many students do not understand the importance of knowing the system and can get lost along the way if they don't have informed people to guide them. Even though they do have faculty advisers and can get information from a number of other sources on campus, some students would still not be able to make correct choices without the help of the learning center staff.

The link with the Admissions Office also helps LOFT monitors to keep abreast of the status of the provisional students. Many of the program participants have been classified by the University as provisional students, which means they have been accepted on a provisional basis. They must get at least a 2.0 average by the time they complete 27 credits in order to be accepted into a degree program. This means that they have until the end of their first year to achieve a C average or they will be dropped by the University. The LOFT staff must remain aware of the status of these students throughout the year since it is the goal of the program to ensure that these students do enter a degree program and don't drop out of school. The LOFT person who works in the Admissions Office is given the responsibility of advising the provisional students; therefore, it is easier to keep check on them with two points of contact.

Still another advantage of the system at Schuylkill is that the LOFT staff person who works both places has a more in-depth understanding of the difficulties students have in trying to keep up with all the work of a regular course load; therefore he/she is more likely to advise students to take lighter loads, schedule a reading and study skills program, take easier courses first, or even

consider being a part-time student for awhile before plunging full time into tough courses in their majors. Some students fail in college because they try to take too many courses at a time instead of scheduling a few and learning how to learn before tackling a full course load.

The final and perhaps the most important advantage of all to having close communication between the learning center and the Admissions Office is that it makes available a lot of information about the students. As students go through the admissions process, they have to complete an educational survey and take several placement tests. The survey collects information about students' family background, high school academic experiences, out-of-school experiences, expectations and concerns about college, educational and occupational plans, extracurricular plans, and reasons for attending Penn State. Students are asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1(excellent) to 5 (poor) in the following areas: notetaking, organization, preparation for quizzes and exams, reading speed, reading comprehension, and ability to understand lectures. They are asked how many hours per week they studied outside of class during their last year of high school, what grade average they expect to have after one year at Penn State, and how many hours a week they think they will have to study outside of class to earn the grade point average they estimated for their freshman year. When all this information about students' self-evaluations and expectations is compared to their SAT scores, Placement Test scores, and later on, to their grades at the end of the first semester,

valuable insights into the students' understanding of their own capabilities and the demands of college work can be gained. Such insights help the monitors prepare individualized educational plans for the program participants and decide in what areas students will need personal counseling. Students often need to be taught to set more realistic goals and accept their own limitations without feeling like failures.

The Admissions Office also prepares a Profile of Academic Abilities for each student. This profile reveals students' SAT scores, the test score distribution for all Penn State freshmen (and where each student falls on the distribution curve in relation to all others), Placement Test scores in English, chemistry, and math, recommended placement actions, and distributions of first year cumulative averages. From these profiles the program participants are selected on the basis of their deficiencies in English and/or math and predicted grade point average of less than 2.0. Placement actions recommend that these students be enrolled in the basic English and math courses before taking the more advanced courses required by their degree program. Unfortunately, Penn State does not give a reading test, so many students with reading problems manage to slip through undetected. When students appear to have weak skills, the Admissions counselors do recommend that they take RCLED 5, a one-credit reading and study skills course. Without the educational survey and the profile of academic abilities, it would take much longer for LOFT staff to identify individual students' problems and plan corrective measures.

In order to completely understand how the Admissions Office and the LOFT Learning Center work together to provide services for the students, one must understand the Admissions sequence of events. The admissions process begins in January each year when students are offered admission to the University for the Fall Semester. Between January and May, students who accept the offer of admission complete the educational survey and take placement tests in math, English, and chemistry. An academic profile is constructed for each student.

From May to August Admissions counselors meet with the incoming freshmen and their parents in a group setting. The counselors present the students with their academic profile and admission information on their choice of major. They discuss common adjustment issues and explain the services available at the learning center. A brochure describing LOFT services is also distributed to all students at this time. Appointments for individual counseling sessions are made.

During the individual counseling sessions, the counselor reviews with each student his or her academic profile and educational survey. If the student is academically underprepared, he or she will be placed in appropriate remedial courses and encouraged to use the learning center.

During the month of August before the Fall Semester classes start, the Admissions/LOFT counselor meets several times with the learning center professional staff to identify the academically underprepared students and select the qualified people for the

Program for Success. They discuss the types of problems these students appear to have and review any changes in academic policy, University rules and regulations. They also review the status of previous program participants.

At Freshman Orientation, the LOFT staff members make a variety of presentations to the students on such topics as scholastic motivation, goal setting, time management, problem-solving, study skills, and other topics. These sessions offer staff members the opportunity to introduce themselves to all the incoming freshmen and hand out a more extensive explanation of LOFT services. The major purpose of these sessions is to motivate the students to improve their learning skills and become more efficient students.

During the first week of the semester the staff will meet individually with the identified population of students. The monitors review each student's schedule and assist the student in making appropriate adjustments withing the drop/add period. They also explain what the Program for Success can do for the student. If the student wishes to participate in the program, he or she signs a contract and the monitor begins immediately to develop an individualized educational plan to help the student maximize his or her chances for success. Regular meetings with monitors and tutors are set up for the students.

By the second week of the semester the workshops, special topics discussions, study groups, tutoring sessions, computer-assisted instructional programs, and other LOFT services are set in motion for the students' benefit. It is the monitors' job to direct

their monitorees to that part of the program that will help them most and to motivate them to take advantage of the offerings. They also work individually with the students to help them solve their academic and personal problems.

Throughout the semester the Admissions/LOFT counselor monitors students' actions (withdrawals, drop/adds,etc.), providing intervention services when needed and keeping the other monitors informed about the status of students.

Although the overall learning center program involves much more than working with underprepared students, it is in this area where it can most benefit from having a close working relationship with the Admissions Office. The students first enter the University through this office and the majority of the information the University has about them is stored here. After they are evaluated here, they are then channeled into appropriate courses and advised about the support services. Gradually, through a series of group and individual counseling sessions they are encouraged to sign up for the Program for Success which most of them agree to accept. Most students appreciate the opportunity to receive individualized help. Since the program is voluntary and is introduced very diplomatically, most people feel no stigma attached to participating. They come and go at the center without anyone's knowing they are part of an academic intervention and support program because most of their activities are shared with students who are not in the Program for Success but who simply want to improve their learning skills. Retention efforts work best when

everyone at a campus works together to meet students' needs and help them maximize their potential.

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